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ABSTRACT

The term "ethno-lingual relativity" is defined as a perspective that is not limited by one's own cultural and linguistic experiences, but rather is open to the contrasting cultural and linguistic patterns of other peoples. It is hypothesized that having an ethno-lingually relative perspective can facilitate one's ability to learn a new language. Support for this hypothesis--drawn from second language research in language aptitude, motivation, personality differences, social and psychological factors, acculturation theory, and pragmatic competence--is discussed. (Author)

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The role of ethno-lingual relativity in second language acquisition

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The term *ethno-lingual relativity* is defined as a perspective that is not limited by one's own cultural and linguistic experiences, but rather is open to the contrasting cultural and linguistic patterns of other peoples. It is hypothesized that having an ethno-lingually relative perspective can facilitate one's ability to learn a new language. Support for this hypothesis–drawn from second language research in language aptitude, motivation, personality differences, social and psychological factors, acculturation theory, and pragmatic competence –is discussed.

Introduction

It is often argued that foreign languages should be emphasized in schools because learning new languages opens students' minds to the ways of other peoples and increases the opportunities for cross-cultural understanding. Fishman has acknowledged the widespread belief that multilingualism provides "greater insight, deeper appreciation, greater sensitivity..." for the speaker (1981:525). Fantini has noted that such behaviors as "empathy, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity...all are furthered by the development of proficiency in a second language" (1993:18). The hypothesis discussed here is the converse of that argument–that having a mind that is open to other ways of looking at the world may facilitate one's ability to learn a new language. The term *ethno-lingual relativity* is defined as a perspective that is not limited by one's own cultural and linguistic experiences, but rather is open to the contrasting cultural and linguistic patterns of other peoples. It is hypothesized that having such a perspective can facilitate one's ability to learn a new language. In this paper, a role for ethno-lingual relativity in facilitating the second language acquisition process will be proposed. Some research findings that may support the hypothesis directly or indirectly are summarized and areas of inter-relatedness to other predictors of success in second language

acquisition are discussed. Finally, some directions for further research and their significance are suggested.

This hypothesis comes, in part, from my experiences teaching beginning and intermediate level Spanish to U.S. high school and college students in the United States and on six-week intensive language programs in Mexico. It has been my impression that some students have had greater difficulty than others stepping out of their own *culture cages* and understanding both that languages are not direct translations of each other and that languages reflect the cultures of their speakers. For example, when I played a song by contemporary Spanish singer José Luís Perales to an introductory Spanish class in the United States, I observed that some students needed to clarify whether the singer was a "Spanish Neil Diamond" or a "Spanish Billy Joel" or exactly who he compared to in the U.S. Others appeared better able to accept him as someone uniquely Spanish and did not seem to require a U.S. counterpart or an English translation in order to process him. Similarly, some students have appeared to have more or less trouble stepping out of their *language cages* to grasp the idea that languages do not necessarily express the same ideas in the same ways, lexically or syntactically.

The hypothesis is also partially based on the work of Kellerman (1979) in which eighty-one Dutch-speaking adults were asked to make judgments about the translatability into English of the Dutch word, *breken*, ("break") in seventeen different sentences. The purpose of Kellerman's study was to determine why speakers may ascribe varying degrees of translatability to different uses of the word. Kellerman argued that native speakers of a language recognize a core function of a word as well as peripheral functions that may be less translatable to other languages. While it was not Kellerman's primary purpose, his study suggests that one skill of mastering a second language may be the ability to look objectively at features of one's native language. By doing so, one can determine which of its uses are related to its core function and are likely to be shared with another language and which are more peripheral and therefore more apt to be idiosyncratic to the native language.

Ethno-lingual Relativity

There appear to be two sub-components to an ethno-lingually relative perspective. The first is the ability to recognize that languages are not direct translations of each other and, furthermore, that the way one's first language expresses a thought is arbitrary. For example, in the English sentence, "I like that joke," *I* is the subject of the

sentence and is acting on the environment. When the Spanish language expresses the thought, "Me gusta ese chiste," it is the *joke* that is having its effect on me. The first sub-component of ethno-lingual relativity, then, is understanding that this same thought is expressed in different ways syntactically in each language and neither way is more correct than the other.

The idea that languages are not direct translations of each other can be illustrated lexically as well. While two languages may have words with the same dictionary definition, the images that the two words evoke in the minds of native speakers of each language may differ. Research in cognitive psychology (e.g. Rosch, in Pease, Berko Gleason, & Pan, 1993:120-1) suggests that vocabulary words are classified in one's mind by prototypes; the more similar a word is to the prototype for that class, the more quickly that word can be recognized as belonging to its class. For example, for most native speakers of American English, a robin has more typical characteristics of the English word *bird* than does an ostrich. Therefore, native speakers of American English can classify robins faster when asked if they are birds. Yet languages differ in the ways they categorize words. Although a dictionary might include *carro* as a Hispanic American definition of the English word *car*, the range of objects to which these terms refer can differ significantly for speakers of the two languages. For example, one native speaker of American English may see a Ford Taurus as a prototypical car and may include such objects as Pontiacs, Saabs, Volkswagens, racing cars, Model T's, and solar-powered cars within this conceptual category. A native speaker of Mexican Spanish may hold a Volkswagen Bug as the prototype for the word *carro* and his or her word class for this category may include Renaults, Chevrolets, busses, trucks, shopping carts and wagons. According to the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis, a language learner who is less bound by his or her first language's way of classifying words and can recognize that the boundaries of conceptual categories may differ across languages may be better able to learn a second language.

The second sub-component of an ethno-lingually relative perspective is the ability to recognize how much of one's own language is culture-bound. On a concrete level, the culture-boundedness of a language can be illustrated by the existence in its vocabulary of a term for a word that does not exist in another language because the object is unknown to its speakers. This can be common with fruits and vegetables that are native to one region of the world. According to the hypothesis, a language learner who can empathize with his or her interlocutors and recognize the culture-boundedness of each language would be better able to learn the new language than one who cannot. A native English-speaking college student from the U.S. was once observed in a conversation

with a Mexican native in Mexico City. Failing to express a thought to her interlocutor, the student sought a dictionary for assistance. When she could not find the word stooge (as in the "Three Stooges") in the dictionary, the student became frustrated and unsure how to proceed with the conversation. According to the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis, this student's inability to recognize the culture-boundedness of the term stooge would put her at a disadvantage in learning of the Spanish language.

On a more abstract level the culture-boundedness of language can be illustrated by the value differences that are reflected in languages. For example, in sharp contrast are the widespread beliefs in the United States that one exercises control over his or her environment and destiny, while fatalism is more prevalent in many other countries (Kohls, 1984). These value differences appear to be reflected in the Spanish and English languages: *To earn* money and *to win* money, for example, are expressed with different verbs in English, but with one verb, *ganar*, in Spanish. It is not clear whether the culture is reflecting the language differences, whether the culture is dictating the language's needs, or whether the two are correlated by mere chance. The importance for our purposes is that, according to this hypothesis, a native Spanish speaker learning the divergent English forms who is able to recognize, accept, and adapt to the presence of such cultural differences will have an advantage when learning English.

In the next section, the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis will be discussed within the context of existing literature in sociolinguistics and second language acquisition.

Related Research

The Whorf Hypothesis

Whorf [1967 (1956)] received widespread attention when he first suggested that there might be traceable affinities between cultural and behavioral norms and large-scale linguistic patterns. While his writings do not address second language learning, they provide support for the hypothesis of ethno-lingual relativity. One could argue that if languages reflect the cultural patterns of their speakers, a language learner who is open to understanding these cultural patterns should have an advantage when learning a new language.

Individual Differences

Peter Skehan's (1991) review article of individual differences in second language learners acknowledges the limited number of studies of such differences, but identifies several areas where learner differences have been shown to be important. While the extent to which learners have an ethno-lingually relative perspective has never been

addressed as a continuum on which learners differ, two other differences–language aptitude and motivation–may be related to ethno-lingual relativity and deserve discussion.

Language Aptitude

Studies of language aptitude have tended to focus on a very narrowly-defined set of variables such as phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, associative memory, and inductive language learning ability (e.g., in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991:167). The last of these abilities, which Carroll defines as "the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials, given samples of language materials that permit such inference" (in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991:167), may very well be related to ethno-lingual relativity since they deal with the recognition of patterns in languages that may differ from those of one's first language.

Of special interest would be which stages of language learning ethno-lingual relativity would most affect. Spolsky (1989) has postulated that aptitude, as currently defined, is more applicable to the early stages of language learning. It seems plausible that ethno-lingual relativity might actually be an aid to both early and later stages of learning, for, unlike the traditionally-defined skills, this perspective could also enable the learner to progress beyond basic communication levels to a stage of fuller mastery of the intricacies of the new language. One could argue that at the beginning stages, second language learners use universal principles and strategies, but at advanced levels, they use second language-based strategies that could be more influenced by ethno-lingual relativity.

Motivation

On the surface, motivation might not appear to be directly related to ethno-lingual relativity; however, it might actually be highly correlated with it and difficult to separate from it. Integrative motivation, as originally defined by Gardner and Lambert (1959) is linked to positive attitudes toward the target language group and the potential for integrating into that group or interacting with its members. Gardner's newer socio-educational model (in Crookes & Schmidt, 1991:472) recognizes that language learning involves learning aspects of behavior typical of another cultural group so that attitudes toward the target language community will play a role in language learning success. It also recognizes the role of cultural beliefs in the learning process. All of these associations with cultural relevance for the learner seem related to the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis to the extent that having a positive attitude toward members of

another group and a desire to learn about their cultural attitudes could correlate with an openness to the contrasting cultural and linguistic patterns of other peoples.

Crookes and Schmidt (1991) have attempted to apply theories of motivation from other areas of education to second language learning. They lend credibility to the possibility of a relationship between motivation and ethno-lingual relativity when they note that the "failure to distinguish between social attitude and motivation [in traditional second language motivation studies] has made it difficult to make direct links from motivation to psychological mechanisms of SL learning" (1991:501-2). The social attitude referred to here may be linked to ethno-lingual relativity as students without such an open perspective may be less motivated to learn a new language, since it would seem less relevant to them. In their call for further research on motivation, Crookes and Schmidt ask, "What types of individuals are motivated, under what conditions?" (p. 497) and call for more hypothesis testing in the area.

Social and Psychological Factors

Schumann (1978) identifies many social and psychological factors that can contribute to second and foreign language learning. One personality factor, tolerance for ambiguity, and one affective factor, culture shock, are especially relevant to the hypothesis of ethno-lingual relativity. Anyone who has tried to learn a new language can attest to the fact that one often must perform in ambiguous situations where topics of conversation and ways of responding are unclear. Some have theorized that learners with a low tolerance for such ambiguity might react to such situations with depression, dislike, or avoidance. Naiman, Frölich, and Stern (in Schumann, 1987:169) found tolerance for ambiguity to be significantly correlated with listening comprehension, but not with an imitation task. Cohen (in Schumann, 1987:169) has suggested that these results indicate that learners with a high tolerance for such ambiguity may be able to listen more attentively and get more comprehensible input, while those with a lower tolerance may become confused by the linguistic input and attend to it less efficiently. One could argue that much of one's tolerance for such ambiguity is related to how structured and limited his or her world view is or how open he or she is to new ways of looking at the world.

Acculturation Theory

Sociological research on acculturation has identified four stages of cultural adjustment that people pass through while adapting to a new culture: the euphoric or honeymoon stage; the culture shock stage; the culture stress stage; and the recovery

stage. Brown (1980) has proposed an "optimal distance model," hypothesizing that this research, along with research in anomie, social distance, and perceived social distance, helps to define a critical period for successful second language acquisition within the second culture. Anomie is described as the feeling of homelessness that one feels at the third stage of acculturation: feeling neither bound firmly to a native culture nor fully adapted to a second culture. Lambert's research (in Brown, 1980:159) showed this stage of adjustment to correlate with the stage when English-speaking Canadians became so skilled in French that they began to think and dream in French. This work directly supports the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis by showing that when the ethno-lingual ties to one's own culture are weakened–and one is, presumably most open to other cultural perspectives–his or her second language skills show the most improvement.

Schumann (in Brown, 1980:159) has hypothesized that the greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the learner will have in learning the new language; the less social distance, the less difficulty the learner will have. Later he summarized his views: "The degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (in Brown, 1980:160). As Schumann's hypothesis is based on a measure of social distance that is hard to quantify, Acton (in Brown, 1980:160) proposed a solution: That it is the perceived social distance between cultures, that determines learners' language acquisition. The ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis is consistent with Acton's to the extent that perceived distance between cultures corresponds to an inability to accept the cultural and linguistic patterns of the new culture. Acton devised a measure of perceived social distance, the Professed Difference in Attitude Questionnaire that asked learners to quantify what they perceived to be 1) the differences in attitudes toward concepts on distance between themselves and their countrymen in general; 2) the difference between themselves and members of the target culture in general; and 3) the difference between their countrymen and members of the target culture. Acton's hypothesis is not consistent with the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis in that he believed that if learners perceived themselves as *either* too close to, *or* too distant from *either* the target culture *or* the native culture, they would have difficulty learning the new language. His belief was that successful language learners see themselves as maintaining some distance between themselves and both cultures. But, unfortunately, the tests he used did not predict success in language learning, so further research may very well support the simpler hypothesis of ethno-lingual relativity.

Circumstantial Evidence From Study Abroad

The ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis would gain significant support if research on students studying abroad were to show that gains in language skills corresponded with gains in cross-cultural understanding. In the introduction to this paper, I alluded to experiences teaching Spanish to U.S. college students studying in Mexico. While I have no documentation to support my perceptions, I was left with the distinct impression that the periods during which the students' minds seemed to open up to new ways of perceiving the world seemed to coincide with the periods during which their language skills made great leaps. Other studies have shown students studying abroad to have had their traditional understanding of their own culture challenged. Abrams' study (in Kauffman, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992:178) of Antioch College undergraduates found that they reported that their perceptions of themselves as Americans were challenged, and Koester's study (in Kauffman, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992:182) of 2900 students who had studied abroad found that the students reported greater interest in international events and in learning, and greater understanding of the U.S. Other studies have found students who study a language abroad to make significant language gains when compared to students studying on their college campuses. Terrell (in Kauffman, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992:184-5), for example, found the average oral and written test scores for college students who had studied Spanish for one year in Mexico to exceed the scores of students with two years of study on their home campus. Clearly, the fact that both cross-cultural understanding and language skills improve during study abroad does not imply causation in either direction. Language gains can easily be explained by the increased exposure to target language input abroad; the fact that these gains correlate with increased cross-cultural understanding–another by-product of studying abroad–could be mere coincidence. Yet, when considered along with the acculturation studies discussed above which show increased language proficiency to correlate with the specific stage of cultural adjustment during which one's own world perspective is most challenged, a connection between increased cross-cultural understanding and second language gains seems plausible. Research of study abroad students that examines the correlation between gains in cross-cultural understanding and language acquisition could provide significant insights into the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis.

Pragmatic Failure

One final area of sociolinguistic research supports the hypothesis of ethno-lingual relativity. Thomas (in Wolfson, 1989:15-18) has identified two areas of pragmatic failure

where second language learners can fail to communicate their intentions because they do not understand the differences between communicative conventions. The first area–*pragmalinguistic failure*–comes when, for example, a native speaker of English tries to translate the patterns of the English request, "Can you pass the salt?" directly into Russian. A Russian addressee would not interpret the utterance as a request and would instead hear it as a question. The second area of pragmatic failure identified by Thomas is *sociopragmatic failure* and has to do with knowing "what to say and whom to say it to" and can be caused by differences in evaluations of "'size of imposition,' 'tabus', 'cross-culturally different assessments of relative power or social distance,' and 'value judgements'" (Wolfson, 1989:17). This reasoning supports the ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis as it attributes second language communication difficulties to a failure to recognize that linguistic and cultural patterns in one's second language differ from those of one's first language.

Conclusion

The hypothesis of this paper has been that having a perspective that is not limited by one's own cultural and linguistic experiences, but rather is open to the contrasting cultural and linguistic patterns of other peoples can aid one in acquiring a second language. Several areas of research lend support to the hypothesis. Language aptitude studies have isolated an ability to induce linguistic rules which seems related to ethno-lingual relativity. The ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis receives more support from theories of motivation which associate motivation with cultural beliefs and attitudes toward the target language community. Studies of personality differences have isolated tolerance for ambiguity, which appears related to the open perspective characterized by ethno-lingual relativity. Studies of acculturation and optimal distance lend substantial support to the hypothesis in that they show a relationship between gains in acceptance of new cultural patterns and gains in second language skills. Studies of pragmatic failure support the hypothesis as they attribute second language communication difficulties to failure to understand the extent to which linguistic and cultural patterns may differ from one's own.

Further research is needed to determine whether there is a direct link between an openness to other cultural and linguistic patterns and an ability to learn a second language. Such a link could take on special significance at a time when the nature of intercultural competence is receiving widespread international attention.(e.g. Fantini, 1993) If such a connection were found, research would also be needed to determine the

range and variation in ethno-lingual relativity in the general population and what other factors could be correlated with this "openness". Furthermore, research would be necessary to discover which, if any, language skills an ethno-lingually relative perspective could facilitate. For example, could reading, writing, listening comprehension, and/or speaking skills be affected differently by having an ethno-lingually relative perspective? Could pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, or rates of interlanguage development be more or less sensitive to such a quality–perhaps because it would cause a learner to seek more comprehensible input, or want to work more at pronunciation? As the pragmatic failure study above might suggest, would an ethno-lingually relative perspective facilitate the acquisition of communicative competence?

Depending on the answers to these questions, relevant implications might be drawn for teaching approaches appropriate for learners with different degrees of ethno-lingual relativity. If one were to determine that ethno-lingual relativity is open to change by classroom teaching, then a major implication of the hypothesis would be that foreign language teachers could increase their students' abilities to master the new language if they could find a way to open their students' minds to new perspectives. In one study, Clavijo (1984) found that teaching cultural information about South America did significantly increase students' acceptance of closer social ties with the people from South American countries. Another study in progress (Gillette, 1992) is attempting to support explicit culture teaching and empathy training as a means to raise attitudes and motivation. Both of these studies would take on even more significance if their success in increasing students' acceptance of other perspectives could be directly linked to improved second language learning abilities.

The ethno-lingual relativity hypothesis has additional intuitive appeal for those who have observed that those who succeed in learning a second language, even if it is difficult at first, often report greater ease in learning a third or fourth language. This perception raises the broader question of whether having an ethno-lingually relative perspective is more prevalent in those who have had the opportunity to come into contact with other languages and/or people from other backgrounds. If that were true, what might be some implications for teaching foreign languages to students who do not have the opportunities to study abroad or to be otherwise exposed to people of other backgrounds? What would be the demographic and socio-cultural implications of such findings? While such questions are certainly premature and beyond the scope of this paper, they are offered to illustrate some important issues that could be illuminated by further research. Given the high percentage of foreign language learners who fail to

master languages despite years of study in school, such investigative research might provide significant insights.

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